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POLICY BRIEF

June 2, 2002

The Passage from India

From humble beginnings, Indian immigrants have overcome great odds to become one of the most influential communities in American society today.

A Gradual Start

Although Indian Immigrants are prevalent in the United States of the twenty-first century, their presence was scarce prior to the 1900s. Indeed, Hindu beliefs discouraged venturing across the “black water” to the United States. Furthermore, European powers capitalized on the lucrative silk, linen, and spice trade in India, forming colonies, and restricting the movement of the native Indian population.

Nevertheless, Indians trickled into the United States, with the first landing in Massachusetts in 1790. A few Indians also came to the United States on merchant ships, frequently as indentured servants. Only 523 Indians immigrated between 1820 and 1898, and the Indian culture diminished as Indians married and assimilated into the African American culture.

Lauded Laborers

On the west coast of the United States, Indian immigrants found employment opportunities. Because colonization by England had delayed Indian immigration opportunities until the early 20th century, the Japanese and the Chinese had already cemented their presence once the Indians arrived. But this minority standing actually benefited the Indian immigrants because the first anti-immigrant actions targeted the more populous Asian groups.

Indians who sailed to the US were often from the northern state of Punjab because this agrarian state was too gorged with inhabitants to offer each citizen a plot of land. They came as indentured servants, working in the sawmills, on farms, and for railroad companies in the Northwest. Praised as hard workers, Indian immigrants worked for 19 hours a day, earning 18 cents per hour. Although this amount seems meager, it was more money than the workers would have received in India.

According to the census of 1900, only 2,050 people of Indian heritage resided within the United States. This number included Anglo-Indians and Indian immigrants. At first an increase in Indian immigration was desired, yet despite the need for “cheap Oriental labor,” hatred quickly arose from the native white population who criticized the immigrants for stealing employment opportunities.

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The “Yellow Peril”

The Indian population was referred to as “Hindus,” irrespective of their actual religion because the distinction between Indian American and American Indian needed to be expressed. As early as the 1890s, before the boom of Indian immigration even occurred, the “Hindu Invasion” was widely discussed in the Pacific Coast area. Senator John Raker petitioned the House Committee of Immigration and Naturalization to exclude all “Hindus” because they wore turbans, ate rice, and were not Christians.

Between 1899 and 1913, around 7,000 “Hindus” came to the United States to work in the unskilled labor sector of the Pacific region. In response to this sudden influx of Indians, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League was renamed the Asian Exclusion League (AEL) in 1907 to combat the immigration of Indians as well.

Indian Independence

After World War II, the hopes of Indian independence became closer to reality. And the United States finally ended barriers to Chinese immigration in 1943, fueling the Indian crusade for equality within the US as well. In 1946, the Luce-Cellar bill was signed into law. This bill provided for the admission of 100 Indians per year, and allowed them to become citizens. Both the Exclusion Act and the Third decision were repealed.

The year 1947 changed the history of India and Indian immigration: India gained independence from Great Britain. Here began the second wave of Indian immigration; 6,474 East Indians entered the United States between 1948 and 1965.

New legislation helped the new wave of Indian immigration. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 allowed entire Indian families to move to the US, as well as protecting the immigration of persons with needed skills. And, in 1946, aliens earned the right to own land. Gradually Indians entered into American society, establishing themselves among the middle-class neighborhoods and farming communities. In the 1950s, Indians began to enter professional careers throughout the nation.

A New Wave of Immigration

On 26th January 1950, India became the largest democracy in the world. Even with this new-found freedom, many Indians chose to immigrate to the United States because of job and educational opportunities. Indeed, the quota on Indian immigration was eliminated in the 1960s, resulting in exponential growth in the number of Indian immigrants. This new wave of immigration, which is still continuing, houses different characteristics than the previous two waves; the new Indian immigrants are not poor farmers from Punjab or indentured servants. Instead, they are educated, skilled, and trained leaders who come to America to profit from their knowledge.

Today, the Indian American population measures over 1.6 million, representing .6 percent of the total U.S. population. Indian Americans are the third largest constituency in the Asian American community after Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans and is continuing to grow at an

average of 7.6%. The overall growth rate for Indian Americans from 1990 to 2000 was almost 106%, the largest in the Asian American community.

Conclusion

Indian American culture in the United States is now vibrant and alive. Indian Americans are now coming to realize the American dream, and represent the top professionals in their fields. They have emerged as one of the most influential ethnic communities, economically, professionally, and socially.

From farmers in California, high-tech engineers and managers in major corporations, physicians in prestigious hospitals throughout the country, scientists in advanced laboratories, students and academics at internationally renowned universities, hotel owners and managers, and even computer scientists and entrepreneurs in the info-tech field, Indian Americans represent one of the most visible and advanced communities in the country. Amazingly, they have done most of this in only one generation, from 1966 to present.

This policy report is a shortened version of AILF's original American Heritage Project research. For more information on this project please visit www.aif.org/heritage.